Equality of Opportunity and Freedom from Discrimination

MHR Connections

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THE MANITOBA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

LA COMMISSION DES DROITS DE LA PERSONNE DU MANITOBA

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New Commissioner arrives and Vice-Chairperson appointed

Vice-Chairperson Loretta Ross believes in education and awareness.

The Manitoba Human Rights Board of Commissioners is welcoming a new Commissioner and announcing the newly appointed Vice-Chairperson. These two individuals bring with them a wealth of expertise and human rights experience.

The new Vice-Chairperson is Loretta Ross, who has replaced Elliot Leven. Ms Ross is a member of the Hollow Water First Nation in Manitoba and obtained her law degree from Queens' University. She has been a practicing lawyer for over 20 years and has served as legal counsel to numerous First Nation governments and organizations.

When she was very young, her grandfather, who served as Chief of his community for 44 years, told her that the education of who she was as an indigenous person would be a lifelong task.

"At first I really didn't understand what he meant, says Ms Ross, "but after many years I grew to realize the significant lack of awareness and understanding of indigenous people. As a result I would be continuously faced with educating, and at many times challenging the views held by non-indigenous people."

The practice of law seemed a natural extension of Ms Ross, as was advancing the rights of indigenous peoples. "I strongly believe that awareness and education are the key to addressing discrimination as the adversarial process often does little other than to further polarize views," she says.

"I look forward to working as a Commissioner with hopes that I can offer any knowledge and experience for helping address the issue of discrimination, both systemic and individual."

Ms Ross is a mother of four, who loves to curl and watch her kids excel in their extra-curricular activities of hockey, aboriginal dance, soccer and volley-ball.

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The Rights Connection

On Behalf of the Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies (CASHRA), excerpts from following Open Letter to Participants of the February 27 National Roundtable on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was written by its President, David Langtry. The Manitoba Human Rights Commission is a member of CASHRA.

Dear Participants:

I write to you today as you seek to address violence against Indigenous women and girls.

This national issue has dominated CASHRA discussions and continues to cause great concern amongst our members. Indeed, CASHRA passed a unanimous motion on this issue in February 2013.

As you know, Canada has a strong human rights legal framework and is signatory to various international human rights instruments that protect Canadians against discrimination. Yet despite these measures, the fact remains that there has been little action so far in addressing and preventing the root causes of violence against Indigenous women and girls, including poverty and systemic discrimination.

The problem requires real, sustainable solutions that demand an unprecedented degree of effort and commitment, with federal, provincial and territorial governments and Indigenous communities and organizations working together. This roundtable is one positive step towards realizing that goal.

We would like to applaud the national Aboriginal organizations and the communities, families and individuals they represent for their tireless efforts in raising awareness of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. We commend provincial and territorial governments that have lent their voices in support and we also recognize the federal government's Action Plan to Address Family Violence Crimes against Aboriginal Women and Girls. Each of you plays an important role in addressing this critical issue.

If we can support your collective efforts to protect the human rights of Indigenous women and girls in any way, please contact us, either individually, or collectively as members of CASHRA.

We wish you all the best in your deliberations. We look forward to hearing about the developments and steps being taken to deal with this urgent matter.

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Diane Dwarka is the newest member of the Board of Commissioners and her achievements and dedication to human rights causes are almost too much to account for in this short profile.

Ms Dwarka has worked at the Department of Education and Training Library and provided reference services to all of Manitoba's teachers specializing in multicultural education, including anti-racism and human rights.

New Commissioner Diane Dwarka says that there remain many instances in Manitoba where humans are denied their rights.

She is President of the Manitoba Association for Multicultural Educators and of the Canadian Association for Multicultural and Intercultural Education and Past President of The Community Legal Education Association (CLEA).

Ms Dwarka believes strongly in the importance of human rights and says that even though every human being is born free and equal, there are many countries and many instances here in Manitoba where humans are denied their rights.

"It is important for those of us who are able to speak up to do so on behalf of those who can't," she says.

Ms Dwarka remembers an incident when she was very new to Winnipeg and went to shop in a store. "The price tag on a watch was so very small that I had to reach in my purse to retrieve my glasses. Immediately, I was approached by a clerk who accused me of putting something from the counter in my purse. I was very indignant and showed her my glasses which I had just taken out. She insisted and asked me to open my purse. I asked that the store manager be present. Of course, there was nothing to be found in my purse but I was highly embarrassed, concluding that because I was brown skinned, I was treated as a thief. I have never set foot in that store since that day, some thirty years ago."

Putting that experience well behind her, Ms Dwarka has received the YM-YWCA Woman of Distinction Award, the B'Nai Brith of Canada Midwestern Human Rights Achievement Award and The Premier's Volunteer Service Award among many other awards and recognitions. She enjoys gourmet cooking and reading in her spare time and says the most influential people in her life are her family, husband Adrian and children Robin, Dane, Damon (deceased), and her grandson, Xavier.

Join us at our Human Rights Booth on Law Day
Date: Sunday, April 19, 2015.
Time:12:00pm - 3:30pm
Place:12:00pm - 3:30pm
Winnipeg Law Courts, 408 York Avenue
Free admission and refreshments!

A life defending the rights of others

Durlene Germscheid 1938-2015

In 1983 a new Executive Director took over the Manitoba Human Rights Commission. Durlene Germscheid had been with the Commission since 1977. After a few years as leader of the organization her bold style and words were reflected in the 1985 Annual Report revealing her concerns regarding human rights and the lack of resources at the Commission. "Although the Commission was provided with three additional positions in 1985 ...this has not been sufficient to ensure the quality of service and human rights protections all Manitobans deserve," she wrote. "The Commission feels that the current situation is totally unacceptable."

Ms Germscheid would remain Executive Director of the Commission until her retirement in 1996. During this time *The Human Rights Act* was replaced by *The Human Rights Code*, and some of the Commission's most famous cases took place, which would change the lives of many Manitobans and Canadians. Chris Vogel began his long fight for same-sex spousal benefits; two women, Tracey Govereau and Dianna Janzen stood up, and after many years of court battles won a victory for women across the country when The Supreme Court of Canada ruled that sexual harassment was discrimination; and finally, the equally famous decision in Brooks vs Canada Safeway Ltd., resulting in a leading Supreme Court of Canada decision on employer discrimination of employees.

Ms Germscheid moved to Winnipeg with her family in 1953 where, aside from a brief period in Churchill, she would reside for the remainder of her life.

The mother of five children, she embraced a life-long career dedicated to aiding the impoverished and to defending the rights of those unable to do soon their own.

Her many accomplishments before joining the Commission included volunteering for the Welfare Rights Movement (1969) and being a founding member, and then Director, of the Winnipeg Council of Self-Help (1970-74).

Throughout her career and life, she also contributed to many local and national organizations serving as: President of the Neighborhood Services Centre; Chairperson of the National Council of Welfare; and Board Member for (among others) the Social planning Council of Winnipeg, the Manitoba Rent Stabilization Board, Osborne House, and the Manitoba Genealogical Association.

Durlene Gerscheid passed away March 20, 2015. The staff and Commissioners pass their condolences to her family and friends, and will always remember her contribution to human rights in Manitoba.